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PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHSL

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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4091

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6141

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3830

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3689

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4383

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

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RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4314

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000075

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2020

TAGS: KIRF PHUM PGOV TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UPS AND DOWNS OF TWO CHARISMATIC RELIGIOUS GROUPS

REF: A. 09 ASHGABAT 1208

1B. 09ASHGABAT 1065

1C. 09 ASHGABAT 1590

1D. ASHGABAT 31

1E. 09 ASHGABAT 409

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) On January 18, poloff met with the leader of the unregistered Turkmenbashy-based Word of Life group, Timur Muradov, during his visit to Ashgabat (Ref A). A member of an unregistered group of the same name in Ashgabat, Batyr, also attended the meeting (Ref B). Muradov participated at the Embassy-organized roundtable for unregistered religious groups held in early December (Ref C) at which he reported stalled registration efforts and the September airport seizure of printed religious material and digital media when he and Batyr returned from a conference in Moscow. Muradov noted that officials, "everyone except a band," were waiting to "welcome" them, and everything they had was thoroughly searched, unlike the baggage of other arriving passengers. He mentioned that two weeks ago, another pastor, Vladimir Tolmachev of the registered Greater Grace Church, had his personal Bible seized by customs officials upon return from a conference in Russia. Muradov had no concrete plans for resubmitting his group's application for registration, which has been repeatedly rejected, in part due to the government's Council for Religious Affairs' (CRA) unwritten policy banning blind persons from being designated as church leaders. Despite the difficulties, Muradov said members of his group have been able to meet in Turkmenbashy without any problems. Within the group there are seven leaders under Muradov who conduct worship services in private apartments, with attendance at these services numbering as many as 20 persons.

12. (C) Batyr mentioned that the Ashgabat Word of Life group's application for registration was recently returned with instructions that certain sections be deleted. He was not sure what items were covered in the sections in question. He said the application had been cleared by the CRA and passed to the Ministry of Justice, where it was rejected for revision. Batyr expressed frustration that, following its rejection, the application had been sent back to the CRA, where it sat for two months before being returned to the

group. He indicated they would make the changes quickly and resubmit the documents. He hoped that further consideration of the application might coincide with President Berdimuhamedov's travel to a Western country in the hope that the government might approve the application to enhance its human rights record. (NOTE: The French Embassy has told us that Berdimuhamedov plans to visit France February 1-2. END NOTE.)

¶3. (C) COMMENT. Recently there have been more reports of airport seizures of personal Bibles and other religious materials than in the past (Ref D). Religious group members are clearly known and targeted by airport authorities upon arrival, and even items for clearly personal use are seized. There have also been past reports that authorities seized personal copies of the Koran from Turkish citizens (Ref E). While the government seems to be trying to crack down on the inflow of religious literature from outside the country, in practical terms it amounts to a mere inconvenience and harassment. In meeting with religious group leaders, it's clear that the amount of material available through the Internet, and the groups' ability to download items and print copies, goes far to meeting their needs in the face of the de facto government ban on religious literature. END COMMENT.

CURRAN